



FRESHMAN YEAR: THE MAKE-IT OR BREAK-IT YEAR

Let's say you put all your freshmen in one room and had to predict who among them would be graduating in four years. What factors would you consider when making those predictions? Their 8th grade test scores? The elementary school they attended? What about their race? Or age? Or family income? In reality, those facts don't tell you much.

WHAT REALLY COUNTS WHEN IT COMES TO PREDICTING GRADUATION: GRADES AND ATTENDANCE.

How do we know this? Because researchers at the University of Chicago—the Consortium on Chicago School Research—have spent years trying to understand what really matters when it comes to graduating from Chicago Public Schools. Working in cooperation with the district, the Consortium researchers have analyzed years of data—surveys, standardized tests, student grades, attendance records—and uncovered some surprising connections. The freshman year is the most important year of high school and a crucial chance for a fresh start. Strong students can quickly fall off course if they start cutting classes and blowing off homework. And students who struggled in elementary school can turn things around if they come to school every day and aim for a B average. Based on earlier research about On-Track Indicators, we know this is the year that will set the stage for whether high school students will graduate and whether they will be ready for college. It sounds simple, but there is much room for improvement.

THAT'S BECAUSE:

- More than half of Chicago freshmen fail a course.
- About 40 percent miss more than a month of school in that first year (which includes class cutting).
- The average GPA is lower than a “C.”

This research doesn't suggest that teachers should make it easier to earn a B in their class; in fact, that could harm students' subsequent course performance. Instead, it suggests teachers are critical in shaping student outcomes. The classroom and school context set the stage for good grades and attendance. Research demonstrates that grades and attendance are better in schools where students trust their teachers to help them and where students see their coursework as meaningful for their future. Our new research doesn't offer pat solutions to the drop-out crisis facing Chicago and many other urban districts—its causes are far too complicated for that. What the data does tell us is that schools can improve their graduation rates by paying attention to the right things and the right freshmen right away.

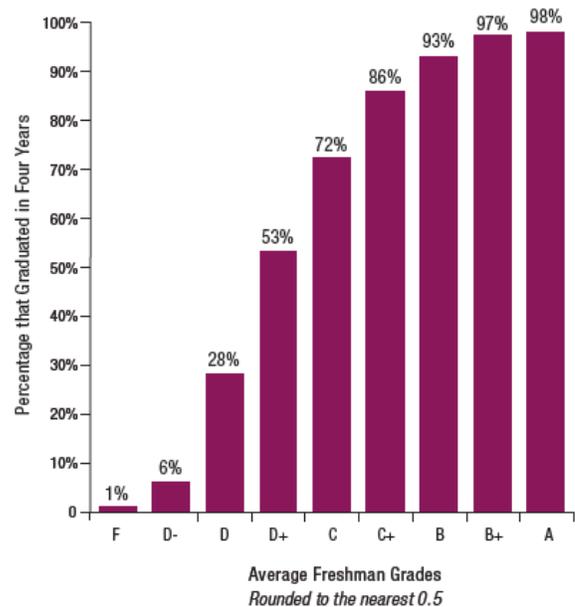


GRADES AND ATTENDANCE

GRADES

- ➔ More than 95 percent of students with a B average or better in their freshman year graduate.
- ➔ Freshmen who earn a B average or better have an 80-percent chance of finishing high school with at least a 3.0 GPA.
- ➔ Freshmen with less than a C average are more likely to drop out than graduate.

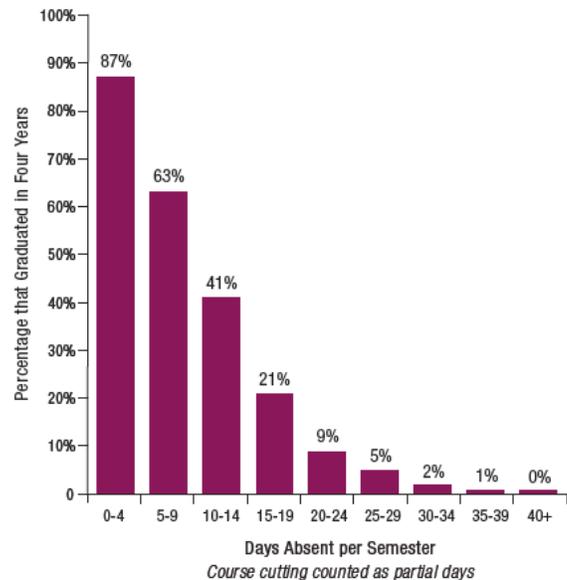
Freshman Grades Predict Graduation



ABSENCES

- ➔ Nearly 90 percent of freshmen who miss less than a week of school per semester graduate, regardless of their 8th grade test scores.
- ➔ Freshmen who miss more than two weeks of school flunk, on average, at least two classes—no matter whether they arrive at high school with top test scores or below-average scores. In fact, freshmen who arrive with high test scores but miss two weeks of school per semester are more likely to fail a course than freshmen with low test scores who miss just one week.

Missing Classes Puts Graduation at Risk





SO... WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Reinforce the importance of getting to school on time and not cutting classes. Your teenager may think it doesn't matter to blow off the first or last class of the day, but it does. Even occasional skipping leads to dramatically lower grades. And it sends the wrong message to teachers about the desire to succeed.
- Talk with your student's teachers about how you can help your teen succeed, especially if you see his or her grades start to fall. Teachers should be helping struggling students, but sometimes it falls on freshmen (and their parents) to ask for that help. We know from our research that students do better in their courses when they trust their teachers and count on them for support.
- Communication with teachers is important, especially if there are personal issues affecting performance in class.
- Make academics your top priority for your freshman. This means trying hard on assignments even when they aren't interesting and choosing to study instead of socializing when there is a big test. Students with good study habits have higher GPAs and fail fewer courses than classmates who don't make homework a priority.